



Review of The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad

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The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad
by Gordon Darnell Newby

Review by: William A. Graham

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These criticisms are serious ones, but they do not detract from my appreciation for the real merits of this book. In *The Pastoral Son and the Spirit of Patriarchy*, Michael Meeker has gone beyond what previous research had accomplished, showing how crucial aspects of a cattle-herding economy and ecology influence not only social organization and religious ideology but also familial dynamics, structures of personhood, and common patterns of behavior and discourse. The book is short, finely disciplined, clearly written, and elegantly argued. There is much to recommend it.

BRUCE LINCOLN

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The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad. Compiled and translated by GORDON DARNELL NEWBY. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

Gordon Newby has provided us with a rich compilation of early Islamic material that is of interest both to Islamicists and to students of religion interested in hagiography, prophetology, and the development of sacred tradition. From the standpoint of the study of early Islamic thought and history, this is a doubly laudable work: first, because of its reconstruction from later sources of an otherwise “lost” eighth-century C.E. text, the first half of the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* of Ibn Ishāq (d. 767); and, second, because of its rendering of the extant fragments as a continuous text presented in reliable, yet idiomatic and accessible, English translation. The work is also welcome on other grounds. It is essentially a history of previous prophets, and when joined to its well-known and previously translated “other half,” the “biography of Muhammad” (already translated by A. Guillaume), it is our earliest major example of the important Islamic literary genre of “universal history,” exemplified later by the famous *Meadows of Gold* of al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), and the *History of Apostles and Kings* of aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 923). Second, because of its focus on figures well known in Jewish, Christian, and other pre-Islamic traditions, it is a useful additional source to place alongside other texts that testify to the shared religious heritage of Islamic, Christian, Jewish, and other religious and cultural traditions in the early period of Islamic history (e.g., the *Kitāb at-Tijān* [Book of crowns] of Ibn Hishām and the *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* [Tales of the prophets], the major collections of which are by ath-Thaʿlabī [d. 1036] and al-Kisāʾī [d. after 1200?]).

Newby offers us a careful, if necessarily still hypothetical, reconstruction of Ibn Ishāq’s narrative of the period from the creation down to the time of Muhammad’s immediate forebears, namely, that portion of *as-Sīrah* ([Muhammad’s] Life) known as *al-Mubtadaʾ*, “The Beginning,” as opposed to the extant portions known as *al-Maghâzî* ([Muhammad’s] Campaigns) and (its preamble) *al-Mabʿath* ([Muhammad’s] Sending/Advent). He has painstakingly gathered the materials ascribed to Ibn Ishāq in the often lengthy citations of several later writers—above all aṭ-Ṭabarī in his *History* and his *Qurʾānic Commentary*, but also authors such as Abūʾl-Walīd al-Azraqī (d. ca. 865), Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī

(flourished ca. 966), and the aforementioned Tha^clabî. He has then organized the material into chapters according to story cycles (most connected with specific previous prophets) ranging from the creation story of Adam and Eve to the story of [Saint] George, the martyr, who is depicted as a messenger from God and a prophet of destruction to an unbelieving people. The order of the chapters is dictated by the ordering of prophet stories in Ṭabarî's history and "the order of the narratives of the Quran" (the meaning of which is not clear).

The translator has prefaced each chapter with very helpful introductions of one or two pages that give some background on each story cycle and its main (usually prophetic) figure(s). While a historian of religions might wish that in these Newby had given us more of his own considerable knowledge of extra-Islamic lore and relevant bibliography concerning each figure, what is presented is important for providing at least a basic context in which to read the ensuing story cycle. The whole volume is prefaced by a good introduction that gives the reader the background and historical setting of Ibn Ishâq's *Sīrah*, as well as a discussion of the reconstruction and general shape and content of the text. While I differ with Newby regarding the degree to which "the nature of the Quranic canon" was a major issue of dispute in the first Islamic centuries and consequently the degree to which Ibn Ishâq needed to try to establish "the primacy of the Quranic text as scripture," the introduction does provide a fine overview of the setting for the *Sīrah* and its relationship to the early development of an Islamic society and worldview out of the many existing Near Eastern traditions and the prophetic mission of Muhammad the Prophet.

For all the excellence of the conception and general execution of this worthy project, several small matters do somewhat unnecessarily mar the larger edifice. Here one must point especially to the poor quality of proofreading that the text evidences. Relatively minor but annoying is the excessive incidence of misprints. Inconsistent transliteration of Arabic names and words is also an annoyance—even the rendering of the definite article "al-" varies in capitalization and in denotation of the "sun letters" (e.g., one finds "Al-Sijistani" but "az-Zamakshari"). Also, if of little importance to the specialist, still a notential pitfall for less advanced students (who presumably will be a major audience for this work) is the sloppiness of the fundamentally useful bibliography: original dates of publication are not given for translated or reissued works; misprints and misspellings, especially in foreign-language titles, are not infrequent; titles are sometimes given in full, sometimes in brief, after no apparent pattern; occasional errors in, or omission of, page numbers for articles, total numbers of volumes, and inclusive publication dates for multivolume works can be noted; and Arabic diacriticals, notably macrons, are sporadically and inconsistently applied. Further, with regard to the content of the bibliography: despite its overall breadth, one wonders why some seemingly basic works relevant to the introductory chapter or to the text itself are not included: for example, Tilman Nagel, "Die *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*: Ein Beitrag zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte" (Ph.D. diss., Friedrich-Wilhelms University, Bonn, 1967); Gustav Weil, *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner* (Frankfurt am Main, 1845); Joseph Schacht, "On Mūsā b. ʿUqba's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*," *Acta Orientalia* 21 (1953): 288–300; Maxime Rodinson, "Bilan des études mohammedi-

ennes," *Revue Historique* 229 (1963): 169–220; Abraham Meyer, ed., *Légendes juives apocryphes sur la vie de Moïse* (Paris, 1925); Heinrich Schützinger, *Ursprung und Entwicklung der arabischen Abraham-Nimrod-Legende* (Bonn, 1961); B. Chapira, "Legendes bibliques attribuées à Ka^cb al-Ahbâr," *Revue des études juives* 69 (1919): 86–107, and 70 (1920): 37–44.

Such concerns as these last ones are not purely pedantic, but they are not of such importance as to reduce essentially the great service done to students of Islam and the history of religion by the publication of Gordon Newby's *The Making of the Last Prophet*.

WILLIAM A. GRAHAM

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Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture. By ARTHUR J. DROGE. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989. Pp. xiv+200, bibliography, indexes.

Arthur Droge's interesting book is a study of how the Christian apologists defended their nascent movement against the charge of novelty. Since to late antiquity, novelty in religion was synonymous with suspicion and fraud, the apologists had to explain how Christianity related to ancient Judaism. At the same time, they had to provide justifications for the divergences between the two groups. Although the apologists did not all reflect a single mind or tradition, their strategy seemed unified enough. They appealed to the antiquity of the Hebrew tradition and claimed to be heirs of it; they also claimed that Christianity was the truest contemporary manifestation of it. The history of Moses was the strongest evidence for the truth of Christianity because it squared with the general belief in the wisdom of the past. The Greeks themselves acknowledged that the great civilizations of the East preceded them. Many Greek philosophers, including Plato, were supposed to have visited the East for their philosophical suppositions. Indeed, Numenius of Apamea, a contemporary of Justin, asked, "What is Plato but Moses speaking Greek?" (Fragment 8 des Places = Clem. *Strom.* 1.150.4 [see Droge, p. 2]). The apologists merely took these truisms to their logical extreme—arguing that the Greeks had borrowed their philosophy from the philosophical legislation of Moses—hence, the title of the book: *Homer or Moses?* The question stated more fully is: Who came first, Homer or Moses? This was a major point of dispute between Christian and pagan intellectuals of the early centuries of the present era.

Of course, Christian writers were not the first to engage in this kind of propaganda. Manetho's *Egyptian History*, for instance, claimed that the culture of the Greeks and Babylonians was derivative of Egyptian culture, even while he himself borrowed a Greek interpretation of the mysteries to explain his native Egyptian religion. As early as the second century B.C.E. Jewish apologists like Aristobulus, Artapanus, and Eupolemus had made the same claim for Judaism. In the first century, Philo, Justus of Tiberius, and Josephus had demonstrated that Judaism was superior to Greek religion and culture, based on the same